THE ARBITRIUM® PAPERS

Paper No. 1 of 4

Human Agency

A New Perspective on One of Our Most Under-Utilised Resources

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Preface

This paper forms part of The Arbitrium® Papers, a continuing series exploring Human Agency, intentional choice and their practical application within individuals, organisations and society. Although each paper may be read independently, together they explore a common question: how might we better understand and strengthen Human Agency?

Unlike many academic papers, this work did not begin in a university. It emerged through more than fifty years of practical leadership experience in business, undertaken alongside a personal journey to understand why I make the choices I do, and why people make the choices they do.

Along that journey I encountered the work of philosophers, psychologists, leadership thinkers and researchers whose ideas often illuminated aspects of what I had already begun to observe. Rather than beginning with theory and seeking practical application, this paper began with practice and sought theoretical understanding.

The ideas presented here were shaped in boardrooms, planning meetings, negotiations, leadership teams and difficult conversations over many decades. Only later did I discover that many of the underlying themes had already been explored from different perspectives within philosophy, psychology, neuroscience and organisational research. This paper represents my attempt to bring those strands together from the perspective of a practitioner.

The purpose of this paper is not to propose a new psychological theory, replace established disciplines or promote a single methodology. Instead, it seeks to connect existing insights while offering one additional perspective through which they may be understood. If that perspective encourages further discussion, research or practical exploration, then it will have achieved its purpose.

Throughout this paper, Human Agency is considered as a foundational human capacity influencing leadership, relationships, decision-making, learning, innovation, culture and organisational performance. The practical application of many of these ideas is explored separately through the Arbitrium® discipline. However, the central proposition of this paper stands independently of any single framework or methodology and is offered as a contribution to ongoing discussion rather than a definitive conclusion.

I make no claim that the path described in this paper is the only route to understanding Human Agency. My own journey has been one of practical experience, personal reflection and continual learning. Others will arrive by different paths, informed by different disciplines and experiences. It is my hope that this paper demonstrates that there are many paths to understanding the same landscape, and that each path, when pursued with honesty and curiosity, has something valuable to contribute.

My hope is that this paper will encourage curiosity rather than certainty, dialogue rather than debate, and further enquiry into one of the most fundamental—yet frequently overlooked—aspects of human behaviour.

Michael A Griffin

Human Agency – Paper 1

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Human Agency Paper

Introduction

For centuries, philosophers, psychologists and behavioural scientists have sought to understand an enduring question: why do people sometimes respond wisely under pressure, yet at other times react in ways that undermine themselves, those around them and the organisations they serve?

Although the language has differed across disciplines and generations, the underlying concerns have remained remarkably consistent. Questions of choice, responsibility, judgement, intentionality, self-awareness and behaviour have occupied thinkers from ancient Greece to contemporary organisational psychology.

In recent decades, Human Agency has become an increasingly prominent concept within psychology and the social sciences. It is commonly understood as the capacity of individuals to exercise intentional influence over their thoughts, actions and circumstances, rather than functioning solely as passive recipients of external events. Albert Bandura described Human Agency as a defining characteristic of human functioning, while related dimensions have also been explored through cognitive psychology, behavioural science, neuroscience and leadership studies.

Despite this substantial body of work, Human Agency has only rarely been examined as an organisational resource in its own right.

Organisations routinely measure financial capital, intellectual property and operational performance, and increasingly monitor employee engagement. They also invest heavily in leadership development, communication, culture, wellbeing and organisational change. Each of these activities seeks, in different ways, to influence how people think, decide and behave. What is less frequently examined is the underlying human capacity that makes such development possible.

This paper proposes that Human Agency deserves recognition as one of the most significant, yet under-utilised, resources available to modern organisations.

It does not suggest that Human Agency is a new discovery, nor that earlier thinkers or researchers failed to recognise its importance. On the contrary, many of its essential components have long been explored through philosophy, psychology and behavioural science. Socrates emphasised self-examination; Aristotle examined virtue and deliberate choice; the Stoics distinguished between external events and the judgements formed about them. More recently, Viktor Frankl reflected upon human freedom under extreme conditions; Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck demonstrated the influence of interpretation upon behaviour; and Albert Bandura established Human Agency as a recognised psychological construct. Each contribution illuminates an important part of a larger picture.

The purpose of this paper is not to replace those contributions, but to consider what becomes visible when they are brought into conversation with one another.

It suggests that, although individual disciplines have explored particular dimensions of Human Agency in considerable depth, comparatively less attention has been given to integrating those ideas

into a coherent organisational perspective. When their points of convergence are examined, a broader understanding begins to emerge: Human Agency may be viewed not only as a psychological concept, but also as a practical organisational resource that can be recognised, discussed and intentionally strengthened.

This integrated interpretation is referred to throughout the paper as The Griffin Perspective. Established research is presented as such, while original interpretation and application are identified separately. The intention is not to claim ownership of Human Agency, but to contribute to an ongoing discussion by connecting ideas that have often been considered in isolation.

If the paper succeeds, it will not persuade readers that Human Agency exists. It will invite them to consider it differently.

Chapter 2 Historical Development of Human Agency

The Evolution of an Idea

The concept now described as Human Agency did not arise from a single discovery, discipline or individual. It has evolved through centuries of philosophical inquiry and scientific investigation into what it means to be human, how people make choices and why they behave as they do.

Although the terminology has changed, many of the central questions have remained strikingly consistent. How much influence do people have over their own lives? Why do individuals facing similar circumstances often respond in different ways? Can judgement be improved through reflection and learning? To what extent are actions shaped by external conditions, and to what extent by conscious choice?

These questions have occupied philosophers for more than two millennia and, more recently, psychologists, neuroscientists and organisational researchers. Their contributions have not produced a single definitive account. Rather, each has added another perspective to an idea that has continued to develop.

This chapter does not attempt to provide an exhaustive history of philosophy or psychology. Its more limited purpose is to identify several influential contributions which, when considered collectively, reveal the gradual emergence of what is now recognised as Human Agency.

Early Philosophical Foundations

One of the earliest foundations can be found in the work of Socrates, whose emphasis on self-examination encouraged individuals to question not only what they believed, but why they believed it. The proposition that an unexamined life is not worth living placed conscious reflection above passive acceptance of circumstance.

Aristotle extended this concern by examining the relationship between character, habit and deliberate choice. Virtue, in his account, was not simply an innate quality, but something cultivated through repeated action. Character was therefore shaped not only by what happened to a person, but also by the choices that person repeatedly made.

The Stoic philosophers, particularly Epictetus, drew a further distinction between external events and the judgements formed about them. While recognising that many aspects of life lie beyond personal control, they argued that individuals retain responsibility for how those events are interpreted and answered. This represented an important movement away from a wholly external account of human conduct and towards the idea of personal authorship.

These thinkers used different language and pursued different intellectual aims. Nevertheless, each recognised an essential feature of human behaviour: people possess a capacity to reflect, to choose and, through those choices, to influence their own actions.

From Philosophy to Psychology

As scientific methods developed during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many of these philosophical questions became subjects of empirical investigation. Psychologists increasingly sought to understand how beliefs, emotions, cognition and behaviour interacted to shape human action. This shift did not displace philosophy; rather, it introduced new methods through which long-standing questions could be examined.

William James contributed to this movement through his attention to habit, will and conscious attention. His work helped establish the idea that patterns of behaviour, although powerful, need not be immutable and may be influenced through deliberate practice.

Viktor Frankl's observations, developed through extraordinary personal experience, reinforced the proposition that human beings may retain some capacity to choose their attitude even under extreme conditions. His contribution did not deny the force of circumstance; it highlighted the possibility that circumstance alone does not fully determine response.

Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck later demonstrated that events do not act upon behaviour in isolation. The meanings and interpretations attached to those events also matter. Their work laid important foundations for modern cognitive approaches and strengthened the view that behaviour may be influenced through greater awareness of one's own thinking.

Albert Bandura subsequently brought many of these themes together in his theory of Human Agency. Rather than describing people as passive products of biology or environment, Bandura presented them as self-organising, self-reflective and self-regulating. His work established Human Agency as a recognised psychological construct and provided an influential foundation for subsequent research into self-efficacy, motivation and behavioural change.

A Pattern Begins to Emerge

Viewed separately, these contributions belong to different disciplines, address different questions and employ different terminology. Viewed together, however, they reveal a recurring pattern.

Across more than two thousand years of thought, several themes persist: human beings are capable of reflection; they possess some capacity to choose; those choices influence behaviour; behaviour affects both individual lives and collective outcomes; and this capacity may be strengthened through learning, practice and conscious development.

What changes across history is not necessarily the underlying phenomenon, but the language used to describe it and the methods employed to investigate it. The historical development of Human Agency may therefore be understood less as a succession of competing theories than as a process of progressive illumination, in which each generation has made another part of a larger picture visible.

The Evolution of Human Agency - Joining the Dots Across More Than Two Millennia

Figure 1 summarises this progression. It is not intended as a comprehensive intellectual history, but as a visual representation of the principal connections developed in this chapter.

Period	Thinker / Movement	Contribution	The Dot Added
c.470-399 BC	Socrates	Self-examination and conscious reflection.	Human beings can question their own thinking.
c.384-322 BC	Aristotle	Virtue develops through repeated deliberate actions and habits.	Character is shaped by intentional choices.
c.300 BC-200 AD	Stoic Philosophers (especially Epictetus)	Distinguished between external events and internal judgement.	Circumstances do not completely determine behaviour.
17th-18th Century	Enlightenment Thinkers	Greater emphasis on reason, individual responsibility and human autonomy.	Individuals increasingly came to be viewed as capable of directing their own lives.
Late 19th Century	William James	Explored habit, attention and conscious will.	Behaviour may be altered through conscious practice.
Mid 20th Centur	Viktor Frankl	Demonstrated the enduring capacity for human choice, even under extreme conditions.	Human freedom cannot be understood solely through external circumstance.
1950s-1970s	Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck	Developed cognitive approaches linking beliefs, interpretation and behaviour.	How people think influences how they respond.
1970s-2000s	Albert Bandura	Established Human Agency as a recognised psychological construct through self-regulation, self-reflection and intentional action.	Human Agency becomes an explicit field of study.
21st Century	Organisational Psychology and Behavioural Science	Expanded research into leadership, engagement, psychological safety, decision-making and culture.	Human Agency is increasingly recognised as influencing organisational performance, although often indirectly.
Present	The Griffin Perspective	Integrates historical thinking into a practical organisational perspective for recognising, discussing and intentionally strengthening Human Agency.	Human Agency is presented as an under-utilised organisational resource capable of practical development through shared language and intentional practice.

The question that follows from this historical progression is not whether Human Agency exists, but whether it is now useful to recognise it as one of the most valuable - and most under-utilised - resources within modern organisations.

The next chapter considers how these historical contributions have shaped contemporary understandings of Human Agency, before examining the practical questions that remain unresolved.

Chapter 3 Current Understanding

Human Agency Today

Over recent decades, Human Agency has become an increasingly recognised concept within psychology, education and the behavioural sciences. Although definitions vary across disciplines, there is broad agreement that it refers to an individual's capacity to influence their own thoughts, actions and circumstances through intentional behaviour.

Contemporary understanding therefore rejects the idea that people are merely passive recipients of biological, social or environmental forces. Instead, it recognises that individuals possess some capacity - within varying constraints - to reflect, make choices and regulate their own behaviour.

This perspective now informs research across leadership, organisational psychology, education, neuroscience, behavioural economics and the health sciences. Each discipline approaches the subject differently, yet together they reinforce an important principle: people are shaped by their environment, but they also shape it through the choices they make.

Human Agency in Organisations

In organisations, however, Human Agency is more often present implicitly than discussed explicitly.

Researchers and practitioners examine leadership, motivation, psychological safety, employee engagement, resilience, wellbeing, trust, accountability, culture and decision-making. Each field explores an aspect of human behaviour and seeks, in different ways, to improve how people think, interact and perform.

What is less often considered is the underlying human capacity that connects these concerns. Human Agency frequently remains an assumption beneath organisational practice rather than a resource recognised in its own right.

The distinction matters. Improving communication, increasing engagement or developing leadership capability may strengthen Human Agency, but such initiatives usually describe the outcomes an organisation hopes to improve. They do not necessarily identify the underlying capacity that makes those improvements possible.

Areas of Broad Agreement

Across contemporary research, several recurring themes can be identified. Human Agency is commonly associated with intentional action rather than passive reaction; self-awareness and reflection; learning and adaptation; personal responsibility; behavioural self-regulation; purposeful decision-making; and the continuing interaction between individuals and their environment.

Researchers continue to debate the relative influence of biology, personality, social context and lived experience. Few, however, would argue that people possess no capacity to influence their own behaviour. The more useful question concerns the conditions under which that capacity is strengthened, constrained or left unused.

Strengths of Current Thinking

Modern research has contributed enormously to the understanding of human behaviour. It has demonstrated the importance of beliefs, emotions, habits, social interaction, psychological safety and environmental influence. It has shown how leadership behaviour shapes organisational culture, and how learning, feedback and reflective practice affect development.

It has also produced increasingly sophisticated models of how individuals regulate behaviour and adapt to changing circumstances. Collectively, these contributions form one of the richest bodies of behavioural knowledge ever assembled.

An Important Gap

Despite these advances, one practical question appears to receive comparatively little direct attention: if Human Agency is a principal driver of behaviour, how might organisations intentionally recognise, discuss and strengthen it as a shared capability?

Many established approaches focus on improving particular behaviours or organisational outcomes. Others seek to influence leadership, culture or communication. Relatively few begin by asking whether Human Agency itself can become the subject of intentional development.

This observation does not diminish existing research. It identifies an opportunity within it. Philosophy, psychology and behavioural science have greatly improved our understanding of why people behave as they do. The remaining challenge may lie less in discovering another theory than in translating what is already known into everyday organisational practice.

Looking Ahead

If Human Agency is a fundamental human capacity influencing leadership, relationships, decision-making, learning and organisational performance, a further question follows naturally: how might an organisation intentionally strengthen it?

Before that question can be answered, it is necessary to examine the common thread running through the ideas considered so far.

Chapter 4 The Common Thread
What They Were All Pointing Towards

Imagine standing in an art gallery and looking closely at individual brushstrokes. Each has meaning. Each contributes something important. Yet the painting becomes visible only when the viewer steps back.

The historical and contemporary contributions considered in the preceding chapters may be viewed in much the same way. Each philosopher, psychologist and researcher approached human behaviour from a different perspective, asked different questions and worked within a different intellectual tradition.

Despite those differences, a consistent pattern begins to emerge. Rather than presenting wholly separate explanations, these contributions appear to illuminate different aspects of the same underlying human capacity.

Different Questions - A Shared Direction

Socrates explored conscious reflection. Aristotle examined deliberate choice and habit. The Stoics distinguished external events from internal judgement. Frankl considered human freedom under extreme conditions. Ellis and Beck demonstrated how interpretation influences behaviour. Bandura described Human Agency through self-regulation and intentional action.

More recent fields extend the discussion. Leadership research examines behaviour within organisations. Neuroscience investigates decision-making. Behavioural economics explores how people choose in practice rather than how they claim to choose.

At first sight, these may appear to be separate conversations. Yet all return to similar questions: how do people make choices? Why do individuals respond differently to comparable circumstances? Can judgement improve? Can behaviour change? Can people become more intentional?

The Emerging Pattern

When considered collectively, five recurring themes become visible.

Reflection
Human beings possess the ability to examine their own thinking rather than simply experience it.

Choice
People can select between alternative responses, even though those choices are influenced by experience, emotion and circumstance.

Responsibility
Choices carry consequences. As awareness increases, so too does personal responsibility for how those choices are exercised.

Development
Human behaviour is not fixed. Judgement, habits, self-awareness and decision-making may all develop through learning and experience.

Influence
Individual choices rarely affect only the individual. They shape relationships, organisations, communities and, ultimately, society.

More Than Behaviour

One observation becomes increasingly difficult to ignore: very few of these thinkers were attempting to explain behaviour alone. They were also exploring the human capacity from which behaviour arises.

Behaviour is what can be observed. Human Agency is the capacity through which behaviour becomes possible.

The distinction may appear subtle, but it is fundamental. Many disciplines concentrate on improving behaviour. Comparatively few examine the underlying human capacity from which behaviour continually emerges.

The Missing Connection

At this point, the various disciplines begin to diverge. Psychology explains cognition. Leadership studies examine influence. Behavioural science explores decision-making. Neuroscience investigates mechanisms. Education examines learning. Organisational development considers culture.

Each makes a valuable contribution. Yet each tends to view Human Agency through the lens of its own discipline, leaving the broader picture fragmented.

The result is similar to studying the heart, lungs, brain and muscles independently without describing the human body as an integrated system. The parts may be understood in considerable detail while their shared function remains insufficiently recognised.

A Different Question

Perhaps the most significant observation is therefore not what these disciplines disagree about, but what they collectively imply.

If Human Agency lies beneath decision-making, leadership, relationships, learning, innovation and culture, then Human Agency itself may deserve greater attention - not merely as an interesting psychological concept, but as one of the most significant resources available to every organisation.

That possibility forms the foundation of the chapters that follow. Every organisation possesses Human Agency. The question is not whether it exists, but whether it is recognised, understood and intentionally strengthened.

Chapter 5 Joining the Dots

The preceding chapters have examined more than two thousand years of philosophical, psychological and organisational thinking surrounding what is now commonly described as Human Agency. Although these contributions emerged from different historical periods, disciplines and intellectual traditions, they collectively point towards a striking conclusion.

Rather than presenting competing explanations of human behaviour, many appear to illuminate different dimensions of the same underlying human capacity. The question is therefore no longer whether these ideas are related, but how they may be understood as parts of a coherent whole.

Looking Beyond Individual Contributions

Each thinker considered within this paper contributes an important element to that wider understanding.

Socrates emphasised the importance of self-examination.

Aristotle demonstrated that character develops through repeated intentional action.

The Stoic philosophers distinguished between external events and the judgements formed about them.

Viktor Frankl showed that circumstance alone need not determine human response.

Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck demonstrated the influence of interpretation upon behaviour.

Albert Bandura brought many of these themes together through his theory of Human Agency.

Viewed individually, each contribution advances understanding from a particular perspective. Viewed collectively, however, they suggest something more significant than any single theory alone. Together they reveal an increasingly coherent account of the human capacity to reflect, choose, learn and intentionally influence behaviour.

A Shared Point of Departure

Despite their differences, these perspectives appear to share an important underlying assumption.

Meaningful development does not begin with the acquisition of new knowledge. It begins when individuals accept responsibility for the way they currently perceive, interpret and respond to the world around them.

Only then can learning become transformational rather than merely informational.

Without this first step, even the most insightful ideas may remain matters of intellectual understanding rather than lived experience. The literature therefore appears to imply that genuine

development begins when individuals become active participants in their own growth rather than passive recipients of information.

A Different Perspective on Human Agency

This interpretation suggests that Human Agency extends beyond the simple ability to make choices. It also encompasses the capacity to examine those choices consciously and to determine whether they continue to serve the individual or organisation concerned.

This distinction is important.

Human decisions are influenced by habit, emotion, experience, culture and circumstance. Recognising Human Agency does not deny these influences. Rather, it acknowledges that individuals may become increasingly aware of them and, through that awareness, develop the capacity to respond more intentionally.

From this perspective, personal development becomes an ongoing process of increasingly conscious choice.

Two Expressions of Human Agency

Once responsibility has been accepted, Human Agency may be understood as operating in two complementary directions.

The first is personal.

Individuals begin to ask:

"Do the choices I make help me become the person I wish to become?"

This question forms the foundation of personal growth.

The second is organisational.

Here the question becomes:

"Do the choices we make help us achieve our shared objective?"

This provides the foundation for collective performance.

Although the context differs, the underlying process remains the same. In both cases, Human Agency enables people to align present choices with the future they seek to create.

Seeing the Whole Picture

Viewed through this broader lens, the contributions of philosophy, psychology and organisational research begin to converge.

Reflection develops awareness.

Responsibility creates ownership.

Seeing the Whole Picture continued

Choice enables intentional action.

Learning strengthens judgement.

Relationships influence collective outcomes.

Culture emerges as the accumulated consequence of countless individual choices.

Rather than representing isolated concepts, these elements appear to form an interconnected system in which each reinforces the others. Together they describe the practical expression of Human Agency in both individual and organisational life.

An Emerging Possibility

If this interpretation is accepted, an important implication follows.

Organisations have traditionally invested substantial resources in developing knowledge, technical capability and organisational processes. Comparatively less attention has been given to intentionally strengthening the Human Agency through which those capabilities are ultimately expressed.

Yet every decision, every conversation, every relationship and every organisational culture is shaped by the quality of the choices made by individuals.

Human Agency may therefore have been present all along. What has perhaps been missing is not recognition of its existence, but a coherent framework through which it may be understood as a practical organisational resource capable of intentional development.

It is this possibility that provides the foundation for The Griffin Perspective, explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 6 The Griffin Perspective

From Understanding to Application

The preceding chapters have explored Human Agency through philosophy, psychology and organisational research. Together they suggest that human beings possess an extraordinary capacity to reflect, choose, learn, adapt and influence the world around them. The Griffin Perspective accepts and builds upon these contributions. It does not seek to redefine Human Agency; instead, it asks a different question: if Human Agency is one of humanity's greatest capacities, what enables individuals and organisations to strengthen it intentionally? The propositions that follow are offered as an original contribution intended to stimulate discussion, further research and practical application.

The Missing Beginning

Many disciplines seek to improve thinking, behaviour, leadership, wellbeing or organisational culture. Yet before any of these aspirations become lived experience, something quieter must occur. People must first recognise that they are continually making choices. Many of those choices have become habitual and therefore almost invisible. Every interpretation, judgement, response and decision nevertheless contains an element of choice. Meaningful development therefore begins with acceptance.

The Three Acts of Acceptance

Development begins through three successive acts of acceptance.

First, I accept that I make choices.

Second, I accept that the choices I have made—both conscious and unconscious—have contributed to where I am today. This is not an invitation to self-blame. Life is shaped by many influences beyond our control. It simply recognises that our own choices have also played a part.

Third, I accept responsibility for the choices I make from this point forward. Responsibility therefore ceases to be about explaining the past and becomes the means through which the future is intentionally created.

Making Human Agency Visible

The Griffin Perspective proposes that Human Agency becomes visible through behaviour. Observable behaviours such as blame, defensiveness, curiosity, avoidance, ownership and openness are not primarily moral judgements; they are indicators that invite enquiry. Rather than asking only, 'Who is responsible?', the more valuable question often becomes, 'What choices remain available to me?' Human Agency is strengthened not by eliminating unconscious responses but by becoming increasingly aware of them. Awareness creates the possibility of choice. Choice creates the possibility of intentional action. Repeated intentional action develops Response Ability.

Human Agency as an Organisational Resource

Every strategy, innovation, relationship, conversation and organisational culture is ultimately expressed through the Human Agency of the people within the organisation. Human Agency is therefore not merely an individual characteristic but one of an organisation's most valuable and under-utilised strategic resources. Like every strategic resource, it may strengthen or weaken over time.

One Capacity – Two Perspectives

The same principle applies equally to individuals and organisations.

Individuals ask: 'Are my choices creating the life I wish to create?'

Organisations ask: 'Are our collective choices creating the organisation we wish to become?'

Neither can fully control the external world. Both can, however, continually choose how they respond to it. External events therefore become feedback rather than justification. In this sense the external world quietly asks both individuals and organisations the same question: 'Was that an intentional response?'

This interpretation aligns Human Agency with continual learning. The learning loop begins not when circumstances improve, but when responses become increasingly intentional.

Directing Human Capacity

Human beings possess extraordinary capacity. Throughout history that capacity has produced compassion, creativity, innovation and courage. It has also contributed to conflict, oppression and destruction. The capacity itself is neither good nor bad. Like electricity, its value depends upon how it is directed. Human Agency is therefore concerned not simply with increasing human capability, but with strengthening the awareness, wisdom and responsibility through which that capability is exercised.

Response Ability

Response Ability is the developing ability to consciously choose responses increasingly aligned with the future we wish to create. It does not suppress emotion or deny instinct. Rather, it strengthens our ability to recognise immediate reactions while remaining free to choose an intentional response. Like every ability, it develops through repeated practice.

Intentional Helpful Responses

Every response becomes an opportunity to exercise Human Agency. An Intentional Helpful Response is one that consciously moves an individual or organisation towards its intended future. 'Helpful' is not a moral judgement but a question of alignment with the future being created.

Shared Language and Collective Learning

Development rarely becomes sustainable without language capable of supporting it. Questions such as 'Was that an intentional response?' and 'Can I tell you how I heard that?' are intended to invite reflection rather than defensiveness.

People rarely interpret the same event identically. Experience, knowledge and previous learning shape what each person notices. The purpose of a shared language is therefore not to eliminate difference but to make those differences safe to explore.

Human Agency is strengthened not because people always agree, but because they learn how to explore their differences through curiosity rather than judgement.

Like climbing a mountain, people begin from different places, progress at different speeds and notice different features along the way. A shared language enables them to continue climbing together. The objective is not uniformity of thought but collective learning.

An Organisational Observation

Over many years of observing organisations, one recurring pattern has become apparent. Many successful organisations appear to thrive because a relatively small number of people continually compensate for the unhelpful choices of others. They repair relationships, resolve misunderstandings, protect standards, complete unfinished work and quietly accept responsibility without seeking recognition.

While such commitment often sustains performance, it also creates hidden costs through dependency, frustration, burnout and missed opportunity.

The Griffin Perspective proposes a different ambition: not to rely upon exceptional individuals continually compensating for everyone else, but to strengthen Human Agency across the organisation so that responsibility becomes increasingly shared rather than concentrated. As this develops, organisations become better able to learn from their own responses. External events become opportunities for enquiry rather than reasons for blame.

From Perspective to Practice

The Griffin Perspective does not claim to have discovered Human Agency, nor to replace the many thinkers whose work has advanced our understanding. Its contribution is to propose a coherent developmental pathway:

Acceptance → Awareness → Responsibility → Intentional Choice → Response Ability → Shared Language → Collective Learning → Stronger Human Agency.

One practical discipline developed from these principles is Arbitrium®. It is presented not as the definition of Human Agency, but as one practical means through which individuals and organisations may intentionally strengthen it.

Chapter 7 The Organisational Implications of Human Agency

If the perspective presented throughout this paper has merit, its implications extend beyond the individual.

Human Agency has been discussed primarily as a human capacity: the ability to make intentional choices and act upon them. However, organisations are themselves collections of individuals making thousands of choices each day. If Human Agency influences individual behaviour, it follows that it may also influence the collective behaviours through which organisations function.

This does not suggest that Human Agency replaces established theories of leadership, organisational behaviour or management. Those disciplines continue to offer valuable insights into different aspects of organisational life.

Rather, the Griffin Perspective proposes that Human Agency may provide an additional lens through which many organisational phenomena can be viewed. Leadership, decision-making, relationships, culture, learning and innovation may appear to be distinct fields of study, yet each ultimately depends upon the choices people make and the extent to which those choices are exercised intentionally.

The observations that follow are therefore offered not as definitive conclusions, but as possible implications arising from the perspective developed throughout this paper.

Leadership

Leadership has long been studied through the lenses of authority, influence, communication, emotional intelligence and strategic decision-making. Each perspective contributes to a richer understanding of organisational leadership.

The Griffin Perspective does not seek to replace these approaches. Instead, it asks whether leadership might also be understood by the extent to which it enables Human Agency within others.

This shifts attention away from leadership as an individual attribute towards leadership as a condition that influences how people think, contribute, accept responsibility and respond to challenge. From this perspective, effective leadership is concerned not only with directing organisational activity but with creating an environment in which intentional choice becomes increasingly possible.

Such a view invites further exploration into the relationship between leadership practice and the development of Human Agency within organisations.

Decision-Making

Decision-making has traditionally focused upon information, analysis, governance and cognitive processes. These remain essential to organisational effectiveness.

Yet every organisational decision is ultimately made by individuals exercising Human Agency.

If Human Agency influences the quality of those decisions, then improving organisational decision-making may involve more than improving information alone. It may also require greater understanding of the conditions under which intentional choices are made.

This raises an important question: to what extent might the quality of organisational decisions depend not only upon knowledge, but upon the capacity of individuals to respond intentionally rather than automatically?

Relationships

Relationships within organisations are often examined through communication, trust, conflict management and collaboration.

The Griffin Perspective suggests these may also be viewed as the cumulative outcome of countless individual choices.

Trust, for example, rarely emerges from a single event. It develops through repeated intentional responses over time. Equally, misunderstanding and conflict frequently arise not through deliberate intention but through habitual or unconscious reactions.

If this perspective is accepted, organisational relationships may be understood not only as interpersonal dynamics but also as expressions of Human Agency repeatedly exercised within shared environments.

Organisational Culture

Culture is commonly described as shared values, beliefs and behaviours.

The Griffin Perspective does not challenge these descriptions. Rather, it asks what gives rise to them.

If organisational culture emerges through the repeated choices of individuals, then Human Agency may represent one of the underlying capacities through which culture is continually created, reinforced and changed.

From this perspective, culture is not simply something organisations possess. It is something that continually emerges through the quality of countless daily responses.

This interpretation invites further consideration of whether lasting cultural change may depend less upon organisational statements and more upon strengthening Human Agency itself.

Performance

Performance is usually assessed through measurable outcomes such as productivity, quality, financial results and customer satisfaction.

These measures remain indispensable.

However, they describe the consequences of organisational activity rather than the human processes from which that activity arises.

The Griffin Perspective therefore raises a different question. If organisational outcomes are ultimately produced through human choices, might sustained improvements in performance depend partly upon strengthening the quality of those choices?

Such a proposition does not diminish the importance of systems or measurement. Instead, it suggests that Human Agency may represent one of the capacities through which those systems achieve their greatest effectiveness.

Innovation

Innovation is frequently associated with creativity, experimentation and the willingness to challenge existing assumptions.

Yet these activities depend upon individuals choosing to contribute, question and accept responsibility for new possibilities.

The Griffin Perspective therefore suggests that innovation may be influenced not only by creative capability but also by the degree to which individuals feel able to exercise Human Agency within their organisational environment.

This raises the possibility that organisations seeking greater innovation may benefit from paying increased attention to the conditions that encourage intentional participation rather than automatic conformity.

Learning

Learning has traditionally been understood as the acquisition of knowledge, skills and experience.

The Griffin Perspective accepts this while proposing that learning reaches its greatest organisational value only when knowledge becomes intentionally applied behaviour.

Knowledge informs.

Human Agency determines whether that knowledge is translated into action.

If this distinction has merit, organisational learning may involve not only the transfer of information but also the continual strengthening of the capacity to make increasingly intentional choices.

A Unifying Perspective

Each discipline discussed in this chapter—leadership, decision-making, relationships, culture, performance, innovation and learning—has developed its own substantial body of knowledge.

The Griffin Perspective does not seek to replace those disciplines or diminish their importance.

Instead, it proposes that they may share a common underlying characteristic.

Each depends, in different ways, upon the choices individuals make.

If Human Agency represents the capacity through which those choices are exercised, then strengthening Human Agency may influence many aspects of organisational life simultaneously rather than independently.

Whether this proposition withstands further academic investigation remains an open question. It is offered here not as a conclusion but as an invitation for continued enquiry into the possible relationship between Human Agency and organisational effectiveness.

Chapter 8 Concluding Reflections

This paper has argued that Human Agency deserves greater recognition as one of the most significant yet under-explored resources available to individuals and organisations.

It has not attempted to replace existing theories of leadership, psychology, organisational behaviour or human development. Rather, it has sought to connect insights from these disciplines and suggest one additional perspective through which they may be understood.

The Griffin Perspective proposes that meaningful development begins with accepting that we make choices, accepting that those choices have contributed to where we are today, and accepting responsibility for the choices we make from this point forward.

If this perspective has merit, then Human Agency may represent a common thread linking many of the challenges organisations currently seek to address independently.

Leadership.

Decision-making.

Relationships.

Culture.

Innovation.

Learning.

Performance.

This paper does not claim to provide definitive answers.

Instead, it hopes to encourage further discussion, constructive challenge, empirical research and practical exploration.

If some of the ideas presented prove valuable, they should ultimately be refined, tested, expanded and perhaps challenged by others.

That is how meaningful knowledge develops.

My hope is simply that Human Agency receives the attention its significance deserves.

Not because it is a new subject.

But because viewing it differently may help us better understand ourselves, our organisations and the choices through which our futures are continually created.

Human beings have always possessed extraordinary capacity.

The challenge has never been the absence of power.

It has been the stewardship of that power.

If Human Agency can be more intentionally understood and strengthened, then perhaps our greatest opportunity is not to increase the power available to humanity, but to increase the wisdom with which we choose to use it.

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The Arbitrium® Papers

Published

Paper 1
Human Agency

Paper 2
The Principles

Paper 3
The Philosophy

Paper 4
The Structure

About the Arbitrium® Discipline

Michael A. Griffin is the founder of the Arbitrium® discipline, developed to explore one practical approach to intentionally strengthening Human Agency within organisational settings.

Arbitrium® is not the subject of this paper. Rather, it represents one practical discipline developed to explore how Human Agency may be intentionally strengthened within organisational settings. The ideas presented in this paper stand independently of that discipline, while the discipline provides one practical means through which they may be applied.

Readers wishing to explore the practical application of the ideas presented in this paper are invited to visit:

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